



NOTES FROM THE VINE: Argentina's wine traditions are notably European

I have been waiting patiently for some hot sunny weather to talk with you about Argentina. OK, not patiently; I have been cursing the rain that caused the tomato mold in my garden. But it's been hotter than not the past week, and last week Maureen Adams hosted a tasting at the Wine Studio that featured both California and Argentina wines.

We know about California, land of sun and vines. And do you, when you think about Argentina, think, "Ah, South America -- hot, hot hot"? You're right if you do, but it's also important to remember that Argentina is a very long country running from just below the 20th parallel to well below the 50th. If you've seen my current cinematic obsession, "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World," you might remember that when Lucky Jack Aubrey takes his ship HMS Surprise down around the tip of South America in pursuit of the French frigate Acheron (a 44-gun frigate built in Boston and modeled on the USS Constitution, I think), the ship is covered in snow and ice in the place where the Atlantic and Pacific meet in stormy seas.

Such weather won't do for grape growing, so the Argentineans planted their vineyards farther north, closer to the equator. But herein lies the problem; as you move north toward the equator, it gets hotter and hotter, too hot for growing grapes. So what to do? Go up, of course. Many of Argentina's vineyards are quite a ways above sea level, where they benefit from the sun as well as the cooling influence of elevation. They've been growing grapes and making wine there since the 1400s, when the Spanish and Portuguese arrived. They brought the Catholic Church with them, and they needed wine to celebrate Mass, so viticulture took off.

If that weren't enough, the political turbulence of Europe in the 1800s promoted migrations of Portuguese, Spanish and Italian immigrants to Argentina, and they brought their wine-making traditions with them. They also brought European grapes with them and found that they grew well south of the Equator. So in Argentinean bottles we find Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Torrontes, Chardonnay and other familiar grapes. The Mendoza region is especially famous for its Malbec, and the Cafayate region for Torrontes.

There is one other good aspect to the wines of this region that deserves prominent mention: They cost less than many of their European counterparts. What's not to like?

In keeping with hot, let's look at two California wines, and then move to two Argentinean ones:

2007 Napa Station Sauvignon Blanc, California, \$15.99, The Wine Studio, Manchester. Vibrant, fresh with a nose of beautiful pears, white apple and citrus, bracing on the palate and well-balanced. Perfect for hot summer nights, white meat on the grill. 88 points.

2006 Napa Station Cabernet Sauvignon, California, \$23.99, The Wine Studio. It's 86 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 9 percent Merlot, 4 percent Malbec, and 1 percent Petit Verdot, making it a Bordeaux blend like those of the northern end of the left bank up in St. Julien. Dark and rich to the eye, with a strong blackcurrant nose (one of my favorite things in the whole world of wine), and dark rich blackcurrant flavors, lush, deep and well-balanced. Grilled red meats, hard cheeses, and chocolate. Maureen had Hannaford's brownies on hand, and ... it worked. 89 points.

2008 Latitude 34 Degrees Torrontes, Argentina, \$13.99, The Wine Studio. Quick review: Torrontes is a white grape with good acidity and floral aromas, often with spicy notes. When it's grown in Argentina it tends toward medium body and acidity, dryness on the palate, higher alcohol and perfume and some stone fruit-like peach. This one's from the Mendoza region and is light and refreshing with aromas and flavors of tangerine and citrus. It's bracing on the palate and when served a little chilled it's summer night perfection. This is one that I'd drink on its own, but it would pair well with cold summer foods, salads, etc. 88 points.

2008 Latitude 34 Degrees Malbec, Argentina, \$13.99, The Wine Studio. This is the best bargain of the month, if you ask me. Don't tell Maureen this, but I'd pay double what she's charging and think I'd gotten a steal. The nose greets you with wild fruit, and the palate is blackberry, wild fruit and rich, balanced components. It's a perfect example of a South American wine that's powerful, rich, and bargain priced. Scoop it up while it's still there. I expect it won't be for long. 88 points.

In the next few weeks, while the warm weather lasts, while I'm not out fussing over my poor tomatoes, I'll be delving deeper into the Spanish-speaking world. And beer lovers, fret not: I'm sipping a Duvel Belgian Golden Ale while I'm writing all this wine stuff, and there is more beer tasting to come.

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